

Austin Women Firefighters  
Austin Fire Department  
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Dear

We, the Austin Women Firefighters, would like to make known some of the more urgent concerns that we have regarding Austin Fire Department building facilities, including both stations and staff offices. Although women have been included in the department for over 20 years, many of the facilities have not been modified to accommodate them. Because we tend to feel somewhat like outsiders, we usually try to compromise in order to fit in. We are changing clothes in broom closets, or arriving at work already dressed in uniform.

The lack of separate toilet facilities at fire stations causes stress and friction between men and women, because inevitably one or the other is waiting their turn. We may arrive at work long before shift change, in the hope of dressing between the male personnel of the previous shift and those arriving for duty. We may even stop at a public restroom near the station, avoiding the potential conflict altogether. Waking up long before the men is another strategy we have learned in order to use the bathroom undisturbed.

The job of a firefighter is very different from most jobs, due in part to the length of the shift. Throughout the 24 hours we may need to change our clothes and/or shower several times: after physical training and drills, after medical calls, and, of course, after fires. There is an added urgency to use the restroom as soon as the need is realized, so as not to be caught on an extended medical call with a full bladder. Women who work in staff positions within the Fire Department note that several division offices have shower facilities for men, but none for women.

The Austin Women Firefighters feel that we have been quite patient and accommodating about this issue, but our frustration is growing. As our department hires more women, we are less likely to willingly compromise equitable access to facilities. An article entitled "A Better Place to Be" recently appeared in *Firework*, the monthly newsletter of Women in the Fire Service, Inc., a non-profit support network of and for women firefighters and other women in the fire service. We are including a copy of this article, because the situation leading up to the changes in Los Angeles is very similar to ours, however, the outcome is very different at the time of this writing. We realize that the Austin Fire Department has made many improvements, but no definitive solution has been reached. Although the Fire Department administrators have acknowledged that the facility accommodations need to be upgraded, the support of the city officials is vital to accomplishing this goal.

The women have communicated many suggestions for improving our facilities and would like to continue to participate in the process of change. Separate gender facilities would improve the work environment not only for incumbent women, but also for potential firefighter recruits. Austin Women Firefighters have always been heavily involved in recruiting, and we believe that the separate facilities can only serve to help in this effort. It would certainly demonstrate that Austin cares about hiring and retaining women in the Fire Department, just as Los Angeles does by providing child care and separate gender facilities on the list of benefits included in their recruiting materials. These changes in the City's work sites can only serve to benefit our department and its employees. We are sincere in our efforts to bring about this change, and we want to keep the lines of communication open among the women firefighters, the administration of the Fire Department, and the City officials.

Sincerely,



Jan Wesson, President of Austin Women Firefighters



Tracy Evans, Vice President



Lisa Millman, Secretary



Kathy Tourtellotte, Treasurer

# FIREWORK

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## A Better Place to Be

Sometimes change is so hard to see that, at best, we can just about let ourselves think it might be happening. It's intangible, almost imperceptible - we can barely feel it, and we wonder if it's even real at all, or just our imagination. In my limited experience, this is mostly how change happens, especially when it comes to issues related to diversity.

But then sometimes change hits us smack in the face, and makes us smile. That is the kind of change I was lucky enough to experience recently.

Starting on the Los Angeles City Fire Department eleven years ago, I worked with men who had never worked with a woman firefighter in their entire career. They were not really sure what it was all about, though in some cases they were pretty sure they didn't like it.

As a rookie firefighter, I worked at two stations where I shared bathroom, shower and changing facilities with the men. It didn't really feel all that strange at the time - it was just the way things were. When I walked into the bathroom or shower, I would shout "All clear!" to make sure no one was naked or changing clothes. I showered early and quickly, to avoid anyone walking in on me. Other women on the department showered only at home, before leaving for work or after their shift.

Having shared facilities didn't make life easy for us or the men we worked with. I always felt I was inconveniencing someone. Some of the worst times involved coming back from emergency runs in the middle of the night - inevitably, I would have to go to the bathroom, as would everyone else. I'd stand by the door waiting my turn. The first two guys would shuffle in, and as they flushed, two more or so would go in, and the rotation would continue until all eight or ten guys used the bathroom before me. I often wondered if they planned it. Sometimes we would even catch another run before I had a chance to use the toilet.

Mostly, though, I was lucky enough to work at newer fire stations that had bathroom and shower facilities for women. But for the past few years, I have been assigned to the department's City Hall Headquarters. Because it is a public building, it has always had women's toilets, but it had just one shower and a makeshift locker room. Most mornings, you would see a couple of women racing to get to the shower ahead of the rush of men.

In 1998, the LAFD began a four-phase upgrade of the department's facilities, which is currently in Phase Four. They anticipate that by July of 2001, all fire department work locations will have separate gender facilities including restrooms, showers, and locker rooms. A total of 73 fire station upgrades will have been completed over the four-year program, in addition to five upgrades at department offices and other work locations.

The women on the department - civilian and uniformed - met to discuss better solutions to the bathroom, shower, and locker room situation. Plans for the building where I work were drawn up, and construction began last April. The project is now nearing completion. As I watch the final changes get put into place, it just makes me smile. I never really thought it would happen.

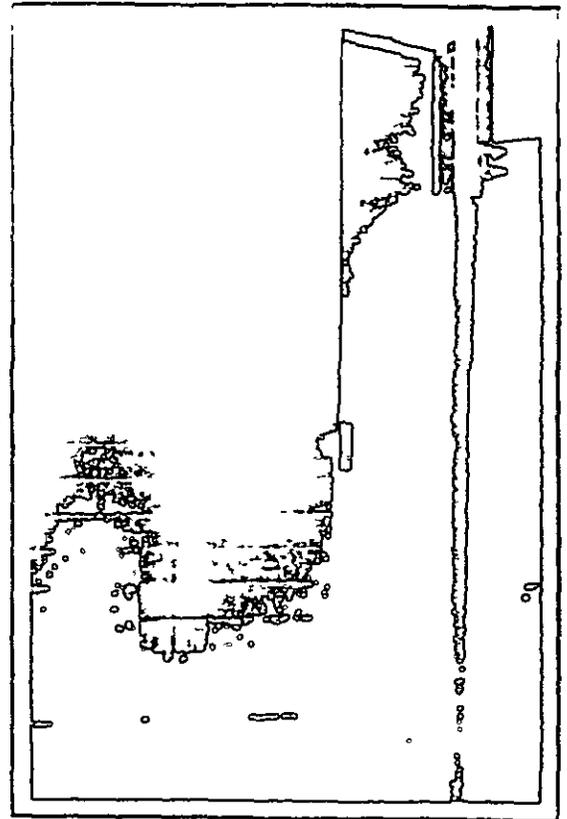
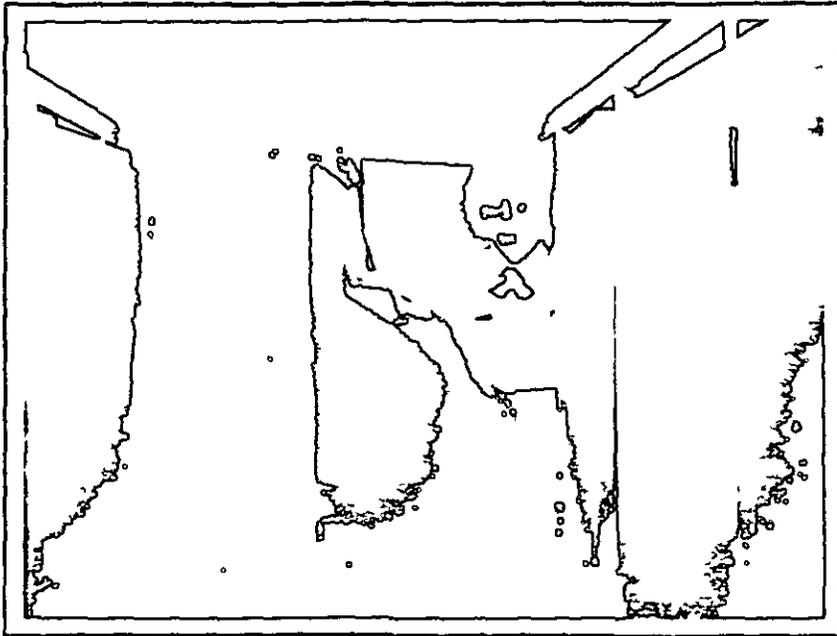
The women on the floor have begun to pick out which lockers we want. We've pooled our money to buy some nice things like rugs, shower caddies, towel racks, and a mirror. It is really nice to have a room of our own. I knew all along it was something we should have, but I never really thought much about how I would feel once it was done. It feels good to know that we worked to make things just a little better for the women who come after us.

This change has been a long time coming. It was originally proposed several years before I was even on the job. The first alterations were suggested in 1985, and approximately a million dollars was put toward the project. This money was used up just in the architectural drawings, and ground was never broken on construction. Then in 1992, a survey done within the department suggested there wasn't really a problem with facilities the way they were - men and women were getting along fine. The changes finally came about with the commitment of the current fire chief, along with a network of fire service women and several department administrators, and the support and persistence of a member of our City Council.

Over the many years I have been a member of WFS and have been involved in firefighter recruitment, I have asked WFS' leadership what things really make a difference for women, and what things make women

want to join a particular fire department. One response was very simple: make the department a place women want to be where they don't have to feel like unexpected visitors or unwelcome intruders. Simple, yes. Easy, no. But finally getting these upgrades made in our fire stations and other work locations has made the LAFD a little nicer place for women – and everyone – to be.

Alicia Mathis  
Los Angeles, California



*Alicia Mathis (left) and Kane Zamora (above) show off the new women's shower and locker room facilities at the department's City Hall Headquarters.*